Pathetic Condition of the Sharecroppers: A Micro-Analysis

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We have undertaken an exhaustive survey of 13,275 farm households in 59 districts of UP, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand ***to determine exactly how much cash the small and marginal sharecropper farmers earn with paddy and wheat farming.*** Forty-eight districts fell in the 237 districts of DPAP, DDP areas and PM's Special Relief Package Districts, and 11 outside them in UP and Bihar. ***The survey reveals that, besides grains for bare survival, the cash income for the sharecroppers is so low that economically it is essentially an unviable activity.***

In the area studied, about 85% of the farmers were marginal farmers (vide classification of Agricultural Debt Waiver And Debt Relief Scheme, 2008); about 10% small farmers; and less than 5% above them. The small and marginal farmers do sharecropping to supplement their income as the lands they own are of low fertility (valuation), having been sold to them rather cheaply in the 70s and 80s by the landowners to evade ceiling laws. In the most prevalent arrangement for sharecropping (at the rate of 50/50 share) the landowners are supposed to provide irrigation facilities, while the sharecroppers are supposed to bear all other costs. In case the landowner is not providing irrigation facilities, he forfeits his claim on the straw (*bhoosa*) and stalk (*puaal*). In the areas studied, the percentage of crop area under canal-irrigation ranged from 4.06 (districts of Jharkhand) to 23.9 (districts of UP) with an average of 13.52%; and the percentage of crop area under groundwater and rain irrigation ranged from 3.33 (districts of Chhattisgarh) to 60.45 (districts of UP) with an average of 23.95%. If the rains are inadequate, a single tube-well with a submersible pump cannot support more than 2.75 acres of paddy and some 4.65 acres of wheat fields.

Average costs involved at various stages are:

Item/Activity	Cost for paddy cultivation	Cost for wheat cultivation
Seeds (high yield variety) @ 4.9 kg/acre for paddy and @ 65 kg/acre for wheat	1460	1600
Tilling of the land (tractor hiring charges)	2100	2190
DAP @ 45-50 kg/acre for both	1070	1070

Urea @ 95-100 kg/acre for both	700	700
Pesticides and weed control	1300	--
Irrigation (diesel pump sets hiring charges)	1600	1600
Harvesting	1600	1300
Miscellaneous charges	1140	400
Total cost per acre	**10970**	**8860**

In practice, being cash-starved as they are, the sharecroppers try to reduce costs as much as possible. This involves using home-grown paddy as seedlings instead of purchasing HYV seeds; dispensing with DAP and using only urea; dispensing with pesticides and doing de-weeding manually, etc. This results in reduced productivity but they cannot help it. Moreover, in contrast to big farmers who use cash-intensive scientific methods and machines, neither the landowners nor the sharecroppers have any professional knowledge of farming. The landowners, with their financial and social interests rooted in urban areas have no reason to learn it; and the sharecroppers are actually only part-time farmers who take up all sorts of odd manual jobs in nearby urban areas in off-season.

After taking into account the average grain losses in pre-harvest, harvest, and post-harvest stages (including milling) in traditional methods, the production is found to be a little over 9 quintals of paddy per acre, and for wheat a little over 8 quintals per acre. The threshers typically retain 15% of the produce and the loss is shared. ***In the end, the sharecropper is left with just about 4 quintals of rice per acre and 3.5 quintals of wheat per acre as his share****—and that too when we have not taken into account the effects of vagaries of nature likely untimely rains, hailstorm, deficient rains, excessive rains, floods, unexpected diseases, destruction by stray cattle and nilgai, etc.*

They cannot sell all of it because they have to retain a part of it for their own consumption. With very little coming by way of proteins (except some pulses) and fats in their diet, the typical consumption of wheat flour and rice for agricultural labourers in a day is actually higher than what is prescribed as a standard for the army and paramilitary personnel [at the rate of 220 grams wheat flour plus 400 grams of rice and 90 grams of pulses (split legumes) per day], for example. Assuming a family of five, this makes their personal consumption requirement at about 4 quintals (396 kg) of wheat and 7.2 quintals of rice per annum. This means that if the sharecropper has to be left with any cash at all after his bare survival, he should be working on more than 2 acres of paddy fields and one acre of wheat fields. The extent of fields they get to work on varies greatly from place to place—so much so that no average can be

worked out. Assuming that they get to work on 5 acres each of paddy and wheat fields by stretching every single muscle in the family, they can sell the produce of 3 acres of paddy and 4 acres of wheat. At the last announced MSP of Rs. 1550 per quintal for paddy and Rs. 1625 per quintal for wheat, this would bring in a maximum cash income of Rs. 41350 per annum (or Rs. 113 per day for five people) only! From this cash, he has to manage every other necessity of life besides food for survival. In case of drought and flood, the benefit of Government largesse goes to the landowner only and not to the sharecropper. ***The income is too low to enable them to repay any loan taken, leading to debt trap and eventual suicides. Migration to the urban labour market not being practicable for everyone, they are condemned to their miserable existence with little hope of redemption.***

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Districts Covered
48 districts [6 districts of Bihar (Bhabhua, Jamui, Madhubani, Nawada, Rohtas, Sitamarhi) 8 of Chhattisgarh (Bastar, Bilaspur, Dantewara, Durg, Janjgir-Champa, Kabridham, Korba, Rajnandgaon), 9 districts of Maharashtra (Akola, Amravati, Buldhana, Chandrapur, Gadhchiroli, Nagpur, Washim, Yavatmal, Wardha), 8 districts of Uttar Pradesh (Allahabad, Bahraich, Balrampur, Banda, Chitrakoot, Mirzapur, Shravasti, Sonbhadra) 2 districts of West Bengal (Midnapur West, Purulia) 8 districts of Madhya Pradesh (Bhind, Jabalpur, Khandwa, Khargaon, Rewa, Shahdol, Shivpuri, Seoni) 3 districts of Rajasthan (Jaipur, Jhunjhunu, Sikar) 4 districts of Jharkhand (Deoghar, Chatra, Palamau, Hazaribagh)], and the following other 11 districts of UP and Bihar (Varanasi, Chandauli, Gorapkhpur, Maharajnagar, Ghazipur, Siddharthnagar, Basti, Mau, Azamgarh, Siwan, Chhapra).